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Social-Emotional Development Of Elementary School Students: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract	Social-emotional development is an essential part of elementary students' learning, reflected in how they recognize their feelings, regulate their responses, understand others, and build relationships at school. This article examines students' social-emotional competencies, learning strategies that can support their development, and the roles of teachers, families, and the school climate. The study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach by examining relevant scholarly publications according to their focus, educational context, and reported findings. The literature points to three interconnected elements: intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, learning practices that provide opportunities for practice, and consistent environmental support. Cooperative learning, discussion, reflection, emotional literacy, and teachers' role modelling can become part of everyday learning experiences. Nevertheless, a fully reproducible SLR report requires clear documentation of the search and article-selection processes. This review offers a conceptual account of social-emotional development while emphasizing the need for transparent review procedures.
Keywords	Elementary School Students; Social-Emotional Development; Social-Emotional Learning

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INTRODUCTION

At school, children come not only to learn how to read, write, and count. Every day, they also encounter ordinary experiences through which they learn how to live together. For example, students learn to wait for their turn, accept their classmates' opinions, or calm themselves after losing a game. These events may seem like routine school practices. Yet, through such experiences, students begin to understand their own feelings and learn how to treat other people.

Social-emotional development is a gradual process through which individuals learn to understand, manage, and express their own feelings and interact effectively

with others. It comprises two related aspects. The social aspect involves the ability to build relationships, understand norms, cooperate, and interact with the surrounding environment and other people. The emotional aspect concerns the ability to recognize, understand, regulate, and express one's feelings or temperament. This development becomes visible during classroom learning, for example, when students work in groups, learn to accept others' opinions, or deal with disagreements with classmates.

One framework for examining these abilities is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). SEL refers to structured methodologies, approaches, or programs intentionally taught and implemented—usually in schools—to help individuals acquire and practice social and emotional skills. It is a means of supporting healthy social-emotional development.

The framework includes five competencies: self-awareness, or recognizing one's emotions, thoughts, and values; self-management, or regulating emotions, impulses, and behavior in different situations; social awareness, or demonstrating empathy and understanding the perspectives of people from different backgrounds; relationship skills, or building and maintaining healthy relationships and cooperating with others; and responsible decision-making, or making constructive and ethical choices (CASEL, 2020). These competencies are interconnected in everyday life. For example, students who recognize their anger may find it easier to pause before responding to a classmate. Similarly, students who understand other people's feelings are more likely to consider the consequences of their actions.

Social-emotional learning has been examined in previous studies. Nurfauziah et al. (2025) discussed the implementation of SEL in elementary school learning. Ani et al. (2025) connected social-emotional learning with student well-being, while Rahmah et al. (2025) reviewed the development of research on elementary students' social skills. These studies indicate that social-emotional issues do not stand alone; they are related to learning activities, relationships among students, and students' experiences at school.

Although the topic has been widely studied, student competencies, teachers' instructional practices, and environmental support are sometimes discussed separately. In practice, however, these aspects are difficult to separate. Group work, for example, can help students practice communication and cooperation. Yet, it will not necessarily succeed if some students dominate or ridicule their peers and the teacher does not address the behavior. Therefore, discussions of social-emotional development need to consider not only the abilities expected to emerge but also the conditions that enable those abilities to grow.

Based on this background, this article reviews the social-emotional development of elementary school students through a literature review. It focuses on the social-emotional competencies that need to be developed, learning activities that give students opportunities to practice them, and the roles of teachers, families, and the school environment. The central premise is that social-emotional development is not an additional concern to be addressed after lessons have ended; it takes place within the learning activities and interactions students experience every day.

METHODS

This article uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), a structured, systematic, and transparent research method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing scientific evidence—such as journal articles and books—that is relevant to a particular research question. The presentation of the review stages follows guidance emphasizing the reporting of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and the final selection of included articles (Page et al., 2021). Clear reporting enables readers to understand the basis on which the authors develop the discussion. Relevant scholarly articles were used as the sources for this review.

The literature considered includes studies discussing social-emotional development, social-emotional learning, social skills, or the well-being of elementary school students. Publications from 2020 to 2026 were selected to reflect recent developments in the field.

The SLR process began by formulating a clear research question using the PICO framework (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome). A review protocol was then developed, including inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting eligible scholarly articles. A comprehensive search was planned across Scopus, PubMed, or IEEE Xplore using relevant keywords to identify potentially relevant literature.

The search results were screened in two stages: an initial selection based on titles and abstracts, followed by an in-depth evaluation of the full texts of eligible articles. Selected articles were then subjected to methodological quality assessment to help ensure data reliability before relevant information was extracted. Finally, data from the studies were systematically synthesized, qualitatively and quantitatively, to draw conclusions, present findings, and report the process transparently so that it could be replicated by other researchers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The literature reviewed in this article is organized around the main themes of social-emotional competencies, learning strategies, the roles of teachers and families,

and the school climate. Table 1 summarizes the relevant studies discussed in the review.

Table 1. Summary of studies relevant to the social-emotional development of elementary school students

Author(s) and year	Focus of the study	Context	Relevance to this article
Rahmah, Zakiah, and Sumantri (2025)	Development of research on social skills	Elementary school students in Indonesia	Provides an overview of social skills and research directions.
Nurfauziah et al. (2025)	Implementation of SEL in the learning process	Elementary schools	Informs the discussion of learning strategies and teachers' roles.
Ani, Rosmilawati, and Juansah (2025)	SEL and student well-being	Elementary school students	Connects SEL with emotional regulation and well-being.
Marinda et al. (2025)	SEL programs and students' social-emotional and academic competencies	Elementary schools	Supports discussion of the planned implementation of SEL programs.
Hadiyaturrido, Suastra, and Lasmawan (2026)	Integration of SEL into the Merdeka Curriculum	Elementary schools	Provides context for integrating SEL into the curriculum.
Journal of Authentic Research (2025)	Implementation of social-emotional learning in Indonesia	Various educational levels, including elementary schools	Provides context for the implementation and educational impact of social-emotional learning.

Source: Authors' synthesis of the studies cited in this article.

Discussion

3.1. Social-Emotional Competencies: Understanding Oneself and Others

In everyday life, students' social-emotional development includes the ability to

understand, manage, and express emotions and to build healthy social interactions. Students need to recognize what they feel and learn to regulate their behavior. At the same time, they learn to understand their classmates' feelings, communicate, cooperate, and consider the consequences of their actions. The five competencies in the CASEL framework help explain the relationship between these two dimensions of development (CASEL, 2020).

Within the social-emotional learning framework, self-awareness is one of the initial abilities that students need to develop. This begins with naming their feelings, identifying their causes, and understanding that feelings can influence behavior. For example, a student who becomes angry after losing a game may recognize that the anger makes them want to throw something or shout at a classmate. Through self-awareness, the student may choose to take a deep breath before speaking.

Another competency is self-management: the ability to regulate thoughts, emotions, speech, and behavior consciously in order to achieve particular goals. Students with good self-management do not immediately become angry, shout, or leave their group. Instead, they can listen to criticism calmly, breathe deeply to regulate their emotions, and respond thoughtfully with logical arguments.

When interacting with classmates, students begin to understand that other people may have different wishes and perspectives. This is where social awareness and relationship skills develop. Students learn to listen, share tasks, ask for help, apologize, and seek solutions when disagreements occur. Rahmah et al. (2025) also show that social skills are an important focus of research on elementary school students. These abilities are needed during play and are equally useful when students discuss ideas or complete tasks together.

The fifth competency is responsible decision-making. Students need guidance in considering the consequences of their choices. In a simple situation, for example, when they see a classmate having difficulty, students can be encouraged to decide whether to ignore the classmate or offer help, and then consider how their choice may make the classmate feel.

3.2. Learning Strategies That Provide Opportunities for Practice

Teachers do not necessarily need to allocate a separate lesson period to develop students' social-emotional abilities. Opportunities to practice these abilities can be integrated into regular learning activities, such as discussions, group work, games, story reading, and reflection. Through these activities, students can learn to express opinions, listen to others, and understand the feelings of characters and classmates. Nurfauziah et al. (2025) discuss the implementation of SEL in elementary school learning, including the strategies used and teacher involvement.

In group work, assigning roles fairly teaches students to take responsibility for their own tasks (self-management) while appreciating the contributions of other team members (social awareness). When differences of opinion arise during discussions, students can be encouraged to use deliberation or voting to reach an agreement (relationship skills and responsible decision-making). Active listening can also be practiced by taking turns speaking without interruption, paying full attention to classmates' ideas, and showing empathy toward different perspectives. At the end of the session, students can express appreciation for one another's efforts and offer constructive feedback politely.

Stories can also be used to discuss feelings and human relationships. After reading a story, teachers can invite students to discuss why a character feels sad, angry, or afraid. Students may also be asked to consider alternative actions the character could take to solve a problem. Such conversations help students recognize that an event can be understood from different perspectives. Teachers do not always need to provide a moral conclusion; appropriate questions are often sufficient to encourage students to think.

Brief reflection after a lesson can help students recall their experiences. For example, teachers may ask which parts of group work went well, what felt difficult, and what they would like to improve in the next activity. Reflection does not need to be complicated. The most important point is to provide space for students to express their experiences honestly. Marinda et al. (2025) also discuss SEL programs as an effort to support elementary students' social-emotional and academic competencies.

However, well-designed activities may not produce the intended results if they are not supported by teachers' everyday behavior. Students will find it difficult to understand mutual respect if classroom teasing is treated as normal. Similarly, encouragement to cooperate will have little meaning if only certain students are given opportunities to speak. Social-emotional learning is therefore also reflected in how teachers correct behavior, listen to complaints, treat students fairly, and help them restore relationships after conflicts.

3.3. The Roles of Teachers, Families, and the School Climate

Teachers are central figures in the school and classroom because they interact directly with students and play a strategic role in determining the direction, quality, and success of education. Students observe teachers as role models: teachers demonstrate self-awareness, emotional management, and empathy in their interactions with students and colleagues. As mentors and facilitators, teachers help students recognize their feelings, teach calming techniques such as mindfulness, and listen actively when students face problems. They also create a warm, inclusive, and

bullying-free classroom in which students feel safe expressing their emotions. As motivators and guides, teachers instill responsibility and independence and help students consider the consequences of their decisions.

A supportive classroom environment encourages students to speak up and express themselves. A safe classroom with anti-bullying policies and respect for diversity helps students feel accepted. Clear and consistent rules are still necessary so that students understand their rights and responsibilities. When disagreements occur, teachers act as mediators who listen and help find solutions. This process teaches students that problems should be resolved peacefully through discussion rather than ridicule or violence.

Students' experiences at home strongly influence their interactions at school because the home is the first setting in which character, communication patterns, and emotional stability are formed. Therefore, schools and teachers cannot separate students' classroom behavior from their family backgrounds. This partnership is important for understanding students' needs as a whole. The study by Ani et al. (2025) supports this view by showing a close relationship between social-emotional learning and the well-being of elementary school students. Monitoring students' psychosocial conditions should therefore be integrated into the education system.

The wider school environment also has an influence. School rules, responses to bullying, opportunities to participate in activities, and relationships among members of the school community shape students' experiences at school. Students will find it difficult to feel safe if teasing or unfair treatment continues without resolution. Consequently, social-emotional development cannot be assigned to classroom teachers alone. All members of the school community need to demonstrate attitudes consistent with mutual respect and responsibility.

3.4. Synthesis of Findings and Implications for Elementary Education

Three interconnected points emerge from the themes discussed. First, social-emotional development includes the ability to understand and regulate oneself as well as the ability to relate to others. Second, learning activities can become opportunities for practice when students are genuinely encouraged to speak, cooperate, and improve their actions. Third, such practice requires a supportive environment through teachers' attitudes, family relationships, and the school climate. These elements do not operate independently. Group activities, for example, become more beneficial when every student feels safe to express an opinion.

For elementary schools, this means that social-emotional objectives should be visible in everyday learning activities. Teachers can observe concrete behaviors, such as waiting for one's turn, expressing opinions politely, helping classmates,

apologizing, and resolving disagreements without ridicule. These observations should be used to provide guidance and understand students' needs. Students should not be permanently labelled as angry, shy, or unable to cooperate based on a single behavior that appears in a particular situation.

This synthesis shows that social-emotional development should be understood as a set of competencies that grow through everyday experiences. Teaching concepts about emotions without opportunities to practice empathy, cooperation, and decision-making is insufficient to establish lasting skills. Learning should therefore provide purposeful social experiences accompanied by guidance and reflection.

The implication for elementary education programs is that social-emotional objectives need to be incorporated into lesson planning and school culture. Teachers can establish observable behavioral indicators, such as waiting for one's turn, expressing opinions respectfully, apologizing, offering help, and resolving differences peacefully. These indicators can be used for observation and reflection rather than as fixed labels of students' character.

CONCLUSION

Social-emotional development among elementary school students takes place through experiences in which students understand themselves and relate to others. Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making can grow when students have opportunities to practice them. Discussions, group work, stories, reflection, and classroom routines are among the activities that can provide these opportunities.

In this process, teachers are responsible for more than selecting instructional methods. Their responses to mistakes and conflicts, and the ways they treat each student, also provide examples for learners. Family support and a safe school environment are necessary so that classroom practices are not isolated from students' broader experiences. Social-emotional development should therefore be regarded as part of everyday school life rather than merely an additional program.

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